

Oecussi Enclave: Too Little Too Late

Written by Dom Kihara-Hunt, January 2000

Oecussi enclave district, the most remote district in East Timor, is still being treated as the forgotten district. The people of Oecussi are now faced with living through the wet season, with rising disease rates, poor shelter, a deteriorating internal infrastructure, inadequate crops planted, and insufficient assistance from the international community. The difficulties of accessing there area, as there is no land link to the rest of the country, and the extent of the problems there, should be reason for greater support and effort on behalf of the UN and other NGOs; but the opposite is true. The enclave has been all but forgotten by the UN.

Left till last by Interfet troops pacifying East Timor, Oecussi was subjected to a more comprehensive and organised demolition effort by Militia and TNI troops; not only by the local Militia groups but also by the groups who fled East Timor ahead of the Interfet troops. They left it one of the worst affected areas in East Timor. People were terrorised and forcibly removed to camps in West Timor. More than 50 people were killed and buried in a mass grave near Passabe in the South of the enclave. Virtually everything in the town that could be removed or destroyed was, apart from 2 churches.

In town the problems are most acute as the urbanised population struggle to deal with the enormous disruption to their lives. Tarpaulins stretched over partially dismantled houses leak, and malaria, dysentery and respiratory illnesses are common.

Compounding the problems, and perhaps contributing to them, is the temporary administration UNTAET. The District Administrator has been accused of being pro-Indonesian, and regularly goes over the border to Kefamenanu to hold talks with the Governor and TNI chief there. Some of these talks are apparently about returning refugees and opening the border for trade, but he has also been accused of seeking to allow Indonesians to register land in Oecussi before land registration has been completed inside the enclave.

The UN central administration in Dili has provided little support to the few personnel that are based in Oecussi. Insufficient staff, vehicles, recovery equipment, communications and guidance make the job difficult, simple activities are made hard by red tape, and there is little internal communication and coordination amongst staff there. Oecussi has not had any civil administration for two months. Four Civil Affairs officers were only deployed three weeks ago. They have not been given any communication equipment other than one satellite phone to contact Dili, shared amongst 28 international staff (including UN Military Observers and Civilian Police). They have not received any training, computers or backup, and have only one vehicle, but are expected to administer the civil affairs of the whole district.

The situation does not look set to improve. Australian troops are to pull out in mid-January and be replaced by Jordanians. Local people fear this on account of their being Islamic, and fears are spreading that the Jordanian troops will be seeking

pleasures from local women. Monitoring their behaviour in Oecussi would be very hard.

Less than three months after Interfet troops came to Oecussi, many of the people have returned. Of an estimated 50,000 people in the enclave district before the popular consultation, UNHCR estimates about 8000 people are yet to return.

Rebuilding shattered lives has in places started. Australian army and navy have established peace in the district and have been involved in the rehabilitation of the hospital, UNHCR have distributed tarpaulins and non-food items such as kitchen sets, and Caritas and WFP have distributed food and seed.

According to one soldier in Interfet, the immediate survival needs of the people have been met - people have some form of shelter to see them through the wet season, and food should be enough until the next harvests come in. In the hills crops are well under way, mainly corn and cassava, but the lowland paddy fields are largely untilled due to a lack of seed.

Some foraged items are sold in Thursday markets in Pune and Tono, but little is bought - few people have any cash. Life remains hard and the next harvest will probably be insufficient.

Now with the wet season on them, local people state that rebuilding will be unable to continue until the start of the dry, in three to four months time. However, small improvements now could start the ball rolling for the local people - such as roofs on schools to allow classes to resume, a starter motor for one of the town generators to get power back in the streets, and the hospital rebuilding being finished. Current efforts are stalled by a lack of materials such as corrugated iron and tools, but if they were finished these improvements may help people overcome the despondency that is setting in when people realise how long the rehabilitation of Oecussi will take.

There are encouraging signs that the local people are taking matters into their own hands. In Macelab village a plot was being cleared and prepared for use as a communal garden, with plans to plant peanuts - 64 families would share the produce. The few who managed to save some rice seed during the troubles have planted it, and the few remaining buffalo are busy tilling the paddy fields. In several villages volunteer teachers have replaced the previous Indonesian ones and are holding limited classes under trees, orally teaching Tetun and Portuguese as there are no materials. Usi Tasae, a group of three villages in the hills, has 23 teachers. CNRT have been talking to people about reconciliation, and collecting census information.

It is evident that, left to their own devices, these people will be able to rebuild their lives and society. It remains to be seen whether the UN can make it happen any faster or better.